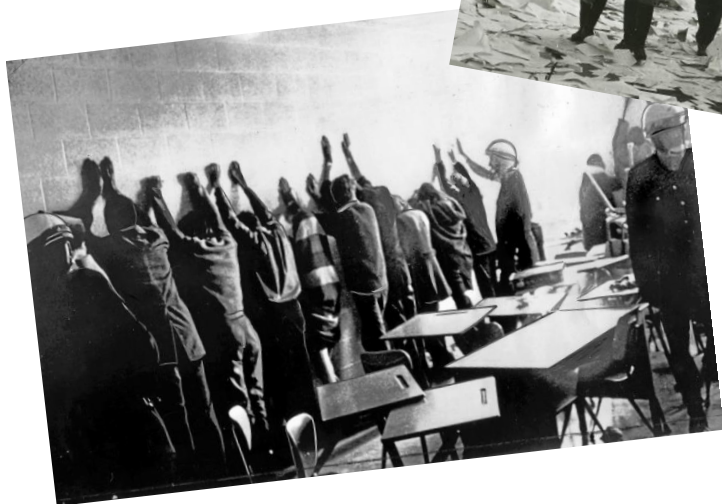


Race and Class in Montreal: The Sir George Student Uprising of 1969



Black Power and Student Struggles in Montreal

Montreal is known as a city with radical sentiments. Powerful student movements, militant unions, wild anarchists, all of these are part of the province's biggest city. Forms of popular resistance are woven into the fabric of Montreal's history. Thus, it's no surprise that the 1960s were a time where radical social movements thrived in the city. This period saw the rise of the New Left, feminist, anti-imperialist, anti-colonial, Marxist, and anarchist movements across the world, as the economic boom of capitalism's post-war economy began to radically reshape out social relations.

Of course, this was also the time in which formerly colonized Black people across the globe began theorizing their own liberation in this new world. The Black Power movement is the prime expression of this, as it rejected institutionalized racial oppression and expressed the right of Black people to freedom and sought to create social relations which allowed for the self-determination of black people.

Montreal itself had a booming Black population, as it went from 7,000, in 1961 to 50,000 by 1968. While Quebec is a French-speaking province, Canada was still a former British colony, and thus, many Black people from other former colonies found their way to Montreal to receive a North American education.

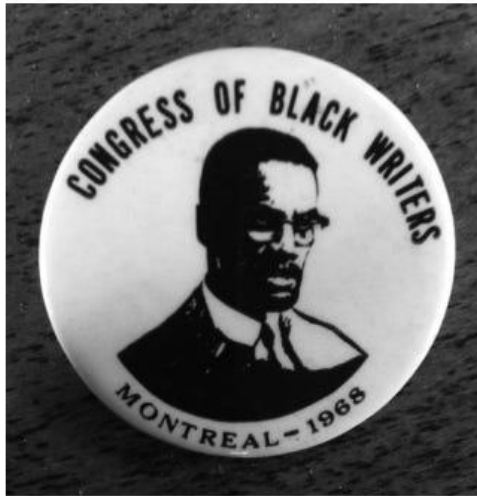
Students from the English-speaking Caribbean, who brought the radicalism and traditions of struggle with them, attended Sir George Williams (now Concordia University) and often organized together. Sir George Williams was the choice for most students, as the admission policy was more accepting and lenient than the more prestigious McGill. Nonetheless, Sir George became a space for young radicals to develop their ideas about class, race, and imperialism.

In 1965 a group of students formed the Conference Committee on West Indian Affairs to discuss issues facing the Black people of the Caribbean and across the world. The goal of the group was to understand the history of the Caribbean by uncovering what was often either lost or explicitly misrepresented by their former colonizers.

Many of them worked closely with well-known radical Caribbean authors, such as George Lamming of Barbados, Lloyd Best and C.L.R. James of Trinidad. James gave a lecture series

on Marxism and Black liberation and many others during his stay in the city between 1967-68. Best and Lamming worked with students in the publication of the *New World Quarterly*, a Caribbean based journal of political economy.

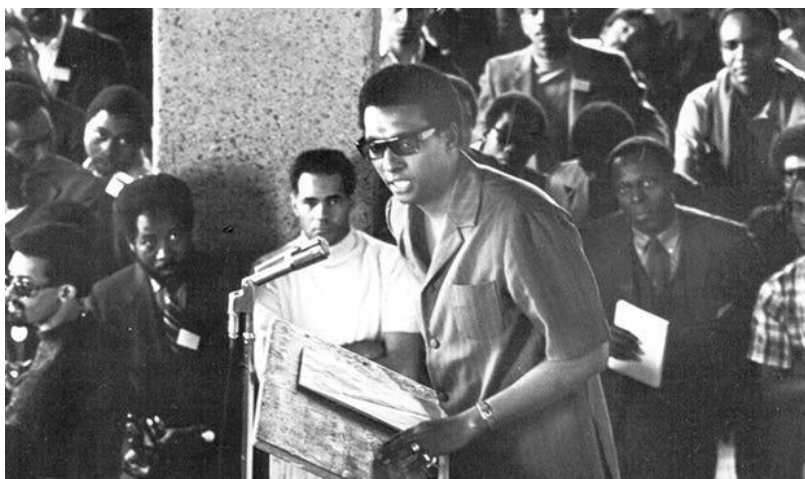
The CCC held further conferences in Montreal that would become spaces for Black radicals to produce ideas with global reach and implications. This culminated in the *Congress of Black Writers* which took place at McGill University on October 11-14 in 1968. The event was dedicated to black martyrs MLK and Malcom X, and featured speakers such as Guyanese Marxist Walter Rodney, African-Nova Scotia activist Rocky Jones, C.L.R James, Michael X, and most notably Kwame Ture.



The event covered a variety of radical topics, from the Haitian Revolution, African history, Fanon, black women, struggle in America, and many more topics that covered the unity of race and class in capitalist society. The even ended with a riveting keynote by Ture, in which he proclaimed:

‘revolution is the total destruction of the old system – total destruction – the re-
replacement of a new system which
speaks for the masses of the people of a
given country.’

Unsurprisingly the crowd was moved by his message.



The event was no small matter, and historians such as David Austin, who is responsible for synthesize the facts of all this history, states it

could be argued this was the most important Black conference of its kind in the post-war period. The event sparked hope among members of the Black community and sent a message that “Black people were here”.

Three of the attendees and students at Sir George, Roosevelt "Rosie" Douglas, Brenda Dash and Anne Cools, would all be important leaders of the Uprising that would take place only a few weeks later in January. Douglas was from Dominica and was an extremely active organizer. Cools was a social worker from Barbados. Finally, Dash was the only one born and raised in Montreal. Her parents were immigrants from Trinidad and Tobago, and she was raised in the historical Black community of Little Burgundy.

This context is crucial to understanding the George Uprising, as it places the struggles in the very real context of the ongoing history. In was only a weeks later in January that the students who were attendees and participants at the conference would fight against the very things they were discussing and theorizing.

As will become clear, the uprising was about more than the specific case in question but represented a microcosm of what Black people across the world faced in the imperial-world system.

The Uprising

While the settler province of Quebec is often known for its student militancy, few know the story of the Sir George Williams affair of 1969 in which a group of Black Caribbean students occupied the ninth floor of the Hall building in protest of a racist teacher. Hundreds of people marched on the streets in support of these Black students, however, many marched in protest of them as well.

The event shattered the myth of Canadian tolerance and reasserted the reality of its nature as a colonial project. This feels like an all-too-common pattern in Canada, where the ruling class constantly attempts to emphasize its tolerance, only for the *essential* racial and class character of its project to burst out violently in movements of crisis.

The conflict began when on April 28th six Caribbean students joined in accusing Perry Anderson, an assistant biology professor, of racial discrimination. Anderson was deliberately falling and lowering the grade of Black students. Rodney John, one of the students who complained, recalled decades later in 2019 that:

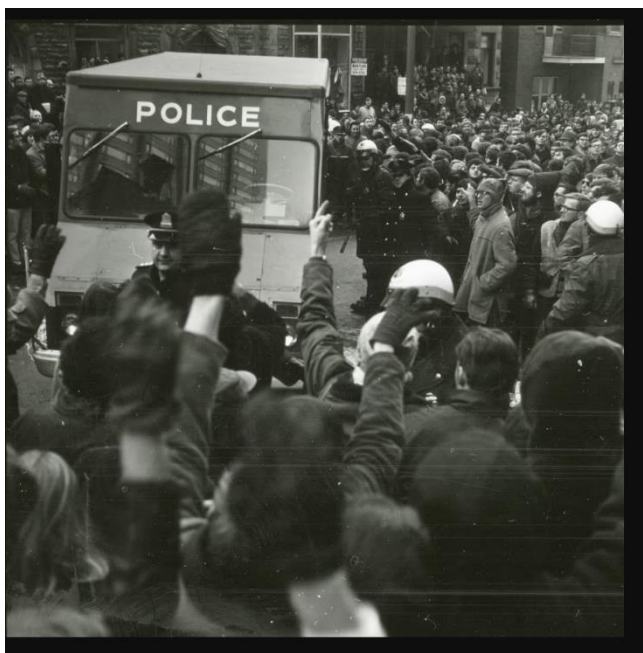
"What made it even more farcical was the experience of Terrence (Ballantyne, another student). He had a White lab

partner. Terrence handed in his lab. His lab gets 7 out of 10. His lab partner borrows Terrence's lab and copies it word for word. The guy gets the lab back and guess what? He gets a higher mark and doesn't get any marks deducted for being late. Just imagine you have 13 students each with their own stories. This was a pattern."

The Dean of Students met with the group, and the accused denied the charges. The administration decided to take no actions. The students were left with no resolution. Months passed, and a general feeling of anger and frustration grew among the Black student population.

Later on December 5th the students again met with the administration again about their complaints. The students left with an understanding that a committee would be drawn up between the parties to discuss the matter. Instead, the university administration responded by escalating, taking their case to the press and television. Black students protested demanding negotiations and a mutually agreeable arbitration process, but these were all rejected.





The students were left with no means of reconciliation through official channels, a sentiment felt today with the students protesting the genocide of Palestinians. Thus, on January 29th, 1969, over 200 hundred students occupied the computer center after an impromptu rally. Two of the leaders of the students were Douglas and Cools. Although initiated by Black students, there were many White and East India and Indo-Caribbean protestors as well.

The spontaneity of this action should not downplay that it was a radical tactic against the myriad of systems at play against these students. It was not just black, but white and other BIPOC students who fought together in solidarity for justice. The moment was a genuine expression of anger among a student body of highly educated people, as John stated:

"We're talking about an era of social change and development of a social consciousness. Many students were prepared to join the cause on that basis. At the height of the occupation you had anywhere from three to five hundred bodies involved. A great majority at that time were White students. But you also had black students who identified with the struggle. Racism was rampant in the community and the university was not insulated from that racism. And so you had a tremendous rippling effect."



The occupation's location was strategically advantageous as well. At the time the computer network was the universities "pride and joy", a symbol of their own efficiency and cutting-edge infrastructure. Universities today still love to boast about their shinny 'cutting-edge' facilities, paid for by the tuition of students and workers who are often over-charged for their education and under-paid for their work.

The occupation went on for two weeks. Despite this, it appeared for a movement that an agreement would be reached. The university agreed to set up an arbitration process, something the protester had demanded all along. Students had begun taking down the barricades, confident that an agreement had been met.

But the students celebrated too soon. The police suddenly showed up, as the principle called in the riot police. They broke through the barricades and attempted to forcefully enter the building. Equipment, furniture and computers were all smashed in the clashes between cops and students.



At one point a fire broke out. Counter-protesters could be heard outside chanting “Let the n***s burn!”. The students fiercely resisted, at one point turning the polices fire hose against them!

The police were absolute brutal to the protesters. One of the peaceful protestors Lynne Murray described the abuse, stating:

“Feb. 11, 1969 was a dark day in the history of Montreal...Students were forced to lay down on broken glass on the floor and were beaten with clubs. We suffered humiliation and shame, the indignity and painful scorn of family and friends. We were incarcerated and branded as criminals...And why? Because we protested against the racist actions of professor Perry Anderson.”

The police themselves were responsible for most of the damage, as John stated that the police themselves started the fire:

"The violence was perpetuated — I have no hesitation saying this — by the police and the administration. Are students going to start a fire when they're locked in?

Although this isn't stated in the official recounting of the event, it's important to note that the police essentially murdered one 18-year-old student from the Bahamas, Coralee Hutchison, who received head trauma inflicted by the police. As Murray states:

“She suffered a brain aneurysm and died shortly after. Her parents believe it was because of the beating she received that day.”



The assault ended with 97 arrests, with just under half of them being Black, a third women, and half born outside of Canada. The streets below were riddled with paperwork and computer cards which were hurled from the building. At least half the block-sized ninth floor was a burnt-out ruin, and the computers were wrecked. The computers were reeked and half the floor burnt to a crisp. The total damages were about \$2-million (about \$15-

million in 2019 dollars), making it the most costly student action in Canada ever.

The administration was at fault for the draconian response. The university principal Douglas Clarke said he told the police to avoid “unnecessary use of force”. In practice, the administration misled the students, and when the computer lab was calm, sicked them with a surprise attack. It was the actions of the principle that ultimately caused harm to the students and damage to property.

It wasn't just the university or the police, but the media and politicians that smeared these brave protestors. The media denounced these students, politicians called on them to be deported (many of them did leave). Many called them “thugs”, “criminals” and blamed it on Canada's immigration laws.

The protestors faced long court proceedings which ended in conviction and sentencing. Douglas served 18 months, Cooles 4, and Dash a couple weeks. Despite this, Douglas became the prime minister of Dominica years after being deported, Cooles became a Canadian senator, and Dash had a successful music career, and left her mark as an important activist from the city.

After two years waiting and bail as high as \$14,000, the students are behind bars today, tonight, tomorrow... waiting for a racist judgement. What do you expect to hear? What are you prepared to do?

BLACK LEADERS FOUND GUILTY

Trio held in jail to await sentencing

Three Black student leaders, participants in the Sir George Williams University computer sit-in more than two years ago, were found guilty in Montreal on Thursday of willfully obstructing the use of computer centre.

Brother Rosie Douglas, a 29-year-old Dominica-born spokesman for Black Nationalists in Canada, Sister Ann Cools, 27, of Barbados and Canadian-born Sister Brenda Dash were found guilty by an all-white jury and face up to five years imprisonment. Sentence will be passed on Friday, April 30. Meanwhile an appeal to have them freed while awaiting sentence has been turned down.

Brother Douglas had been free on \$14,000 bail, while Sister Cools and Sister Dash were each on \$3,000 bail.

CONT'D ON PAGE 3



ANN COOLS



ROSIE DOUGLAS



BRENDA DASH



MARTYRS NEED YOUR SUPPORT

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Produced by CONTRAST on behalf of the Black Students Union of the University of Toronto and the Black

Students Association of McGill University.

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Most of the students who accused Anderson ended up continuing their academic careers, such as John who would gain a PhD in Psychology. Others however, such as Kennedy Fredrick did not continue his degree due to stress caused from the horrific event. In terms of the accused, the professor was suspended for the duration of the crises. However, he was reinstated February 12th, and a hearing

ultimately found him not to be guilty of any form of racism. Unsurprisingly, the results of the event simply reaffirmed the racist imperial nature of Canada.

The suppression of these students, who's requests were frankly quite tame by today's standards, was not just a matter of local concern. Since movements for Black Power were seen as inherently connected to the struggles for communism, these students were seen as threats to national security. In fact, the RCMP were monitoring the group of students as a part of their Cold War anti-communism practices. A description of the event found in RCMP briefings at the time reveals this all too clearly, as they described the occupation as unrest that:

“will terminate in a communist dictatorship of the proletariat that will be more fascist than even that of the Nazi regime in Germany during World War II.”

This sounds more like a parody of the Cold-War red scare hysteria than something an



actual intelligence agency would write down, but this was apparently really what they believed.

Even before the uprising, the RCMP established a “racial intelligence program” to disrupt Caribbean students and activists connected to Sir George. Assistant RCMP Commissioner Stanley Vincent Maurice Chisholm gave examples of the tactics used, such as pouring a chemical agent into Douglas’s car to prevent it from working, then making him take a ride with an informant to record him. The goal was to sabotage his image as a leader, creating division within the groups and fractionalize already shaky alliances.

Dash was also the target of state suppression, as she was a powerful orator, and great organizer for the Black community. Thus, she was monitored by the state due to her status as a “Black Power radical”. She would be “rounded up” in her words and jailed for participation in Black Power events or during scares such as the FLQ crises.

The local police, RCMP, and administration all had agents attempting to infiltrate the occupation itself. They used dirty tricks such as having an agent who was later exposed as such suggesting putting dynamite in the elevator shaft. John argues that if they were willing to go that far, it’s not a stretch to think they would also burn down the floor.

This was seen as part of the broader struggle against radical movements, as an RCMP brief in 1969 described how “the infiltration of Sir George Williams is an example of what’s happening in universities throughout North America.” The students, even if they didn’t know it, were fighting social forces from all over the system. In this sense, not much as changed today.

Struggle on all fronts, struggle together.

What’s all too clear in the struggles of the past and present is that the battle we face is on all front. When all channels of formal representation and mediation fail, when there is no choice but to put yourself on the line, the system will do everything it can destroy you. The private and public bureaucracies, the state, police, courts, the media, all the hegemonic institutions of capitalist society will work to destroy and subdue all resistance.

The student resistance in the imperial core to the ongoing genocide in Palestine has made this clear once more, and to a whole new generation of people. Fierce resistance by students, workers, teachers, and community members, who have been attacked on all fronts,

has shown just how much the ruling class is willing to use to keep *its* order. From Colombia to UCLA, Humbolt to Emory, McGill to Toronto, and many more across the world, organized resistance is growing, the likes of which the ruling class has not seen in decades. In all cases, students standing up for justice and against racist, colonial and capitalist domination, are met with complete disregard by the administration, smearing by the media, charges by the courts, and violence by the police.



In the U.S, President Shafik decision to call the police on students at Columbia led to draconian violence being used on students, who were beaten, brutalized, thrown down stairs, and had flash bangs used on them. This

only revealed the wicked nature of our system, which in the last instances is always in forced by violence. This mirrors too closely what happened to students at Sir George, at what is happening at other schools across the globe. Ultimately, the ruling class must uphold power by any means, even at the cost of their so-called values of democracy and liberty.

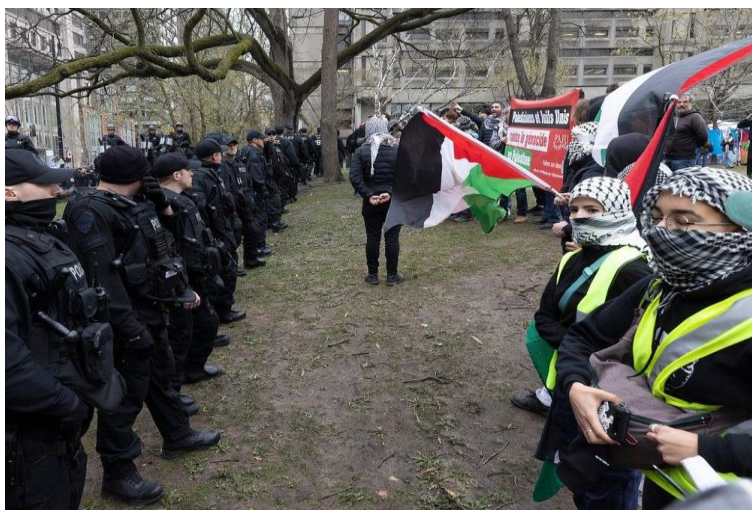


Our battle will not be easy. Our enemy is well established, well equipped, and has been ruling with little to no resistance for decades. However, our strength comes from numbers. They are the few and we are the many, and the more who realize this the stronger we become. The ingenuity and bravery of the masses, when organized and focused, is a force that no state can resist. The more we work together, the more

they will learn to fear our power. This movement is that of the masses. Our revolution is *local in form*, but *global in essence*.

When we look back at these events in the years to come, I assume many will feel similar to how John describes the Sir George uprising and the suffering it caused:

I reflected on the careers that were truncated, the families that were disrupted, the students beaten by the police, those who were imprisoned, and the racism that was unleashed on the black community from many quarters, the police, the media, the citizens, and even members of the various governments.





The lesson to take from these ongoing struggles is that, while our battle is on all fronts against the *totality of capitalist society*, our comrades are on all fronts as well. The masses make history because they make life, they do the work to reproduce the conditions of our social relations everyday. When the masses come together, when they struggle against the ruling class, the precarity of their power reveals itself immediately. Once the masses realize their power as a collective, it will be all but over for the dominators.

Therefore, we struggle for a world without the suffering and pain caused by centuries of colonial, capitalist and racial oppression, and

fight for the day where we can truly liberate our social relations. In the words of the great Ture, revolution is the *total destruction of the old system*. Only through revolution can we create a new system which speaks for the masses, only through revolution can we finally free ourselves.

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